

CHAPTER II

THE MODERN SCHOLAR LOOKS AT JOB

THE scholar has been attracted to *Job* just as the ordinary man has been, for the problem it handles spares no rank or class, nor can learning free us from suffering. He has, however, found additional attractions in the book, when he has looked on it merely as a literary product. Very many of the questions he has raised and discussed have no bearing on the purpose of this book and may be completely ignored. Others, however, vitally affect our understanding of *Job* and must be briefly considered.

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

There is no agreement on the date when *Job* was written, and no convincing suggestion as to its authorship has ever been made. While it is true that the "official" Talmudic tradition (*Baba Bathra* 14b, *seq.*) attributes it to Moses, the discussion that follows it shows that it is no more than a pious pronouncement of no authority, for the rabbis place the book, or the lifetime of Job, at varying times between Isaac and Joseph to Cyrus and Ahasuerus. Virtually the only arguments that can be advanced in favour of Mosaic authorship are a general sense of fitness, and the use in common of certain rarer words in *Job* and the Pentateuch. In fact the differences of vocabulary are more striking than the similarities, and subjective arguments can be made to prove almost anything.

Both the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* and Young in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* reject a Mosaic authorship, and it seems clear that we should bow to the Holy Spirit's silence and accept the book as anonymous. As regards the date of the book we would do well to take up a similar position. Young adopts the view of Delitzsch that it was written in the time of Solomon, but the evidence can equally well be interpreted as supporting a later date. The simple fact is that nothing depends either on the date of composition or on the authorship.

The suggestion that the book must be early because the law of Moses, the Exodus, etc., are not mentioned has no validity, because the characters in it are not Israelites, and it is no chance that in the actual speeches the name Jehovah is found only once (12: 9), and here seven manuscripts, undoubtedly rightly, have God instead. The background is, in fact, kept deliberately as general and as vague as possible, so that the problem of Job may be seen in all its mystery, unobscured by any purely temporal considerations.

HISTORY OR PARABLE?

It will come as a surprise to many that there have been Jewish rabbis who denied the historicity of Job. The Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a) tells us of one in the third century A.D. who stated, "Job did not exist and was not created; he is a parable." While the view was obviously a minority one, Maimonides, the greatest Jewish scholar of the early middle ages, could say (*Moreh Nebuchim* iii. 22), "Its basis is a fiction, conceived for the purpose of explaining the different opinions which people held on Divine Providence." While we do not agree with this, we believe that, at least in its earlier formulation, it was intended to express a truth which most today tacitly accept.

Ezek. 14: 14, 20 is sufficient evidence for the historical existence of Job. If I am correct in earlier statements* as to the identity of the Daniel here mentioned by Ezekiel, he is referring to three men from an early date in human history. It is also clear that the story of Job circulated widely in forms differing materially from that in the Bible—a summary will be found in Stevenson, pp. 76-86—but, in spite of the opinion of Theodore, Bishop of Mopsuestia (392-428), I see no reason for preferring any of the popular versions to the form of the story in the Bible.

Though the story will have come down the centuries to the writer of the book, its heart (chs. 3-42: 6) will represent his re-writing of it under the Spirit's guidance. The difficulties of style and language prevented the translators of the A.V. from doing justice to the magnificence of the poetic language, and though the R.V. is much superior, it still leaves much to be desired. As a result we often fail to realize that we cannot be reading a verbatim report: we have a poetic transformation of the original prose narrative before us.

* *Men Spake from God*, p. 142; *Ezekiel: The Man and His Message*, p. 59.

Against this there has been urged the ability of the Arab to break out in spontaneous poetic utterance, when under great emotional stress. If it were only Job who speaks in poetry, we might give considerable weight to this fact, but all the characters do, and all the time at that.

This is not to suggest that *Job* is a mere invention based on an old story, or that the author has so transformed his hero that he would not have recognized himself. We have the same magic of the Spirit's transforming power as in the Psalms. There the joys and sorrows of men, David and others, are taken and so transformed that they have become expressive of the experiences of all men of God, so that the Psalter is the hymn book of Synagogue and Church alike. In the same way the sufferings and strivings of Job and the sophistications of his friends have been touched with a gold that makes them speak to all generations in all lands.

When modern Jewish scholars claim that Job is a parable of Israel and its sufferings, there is more than a little truth in it. Though Job is an individual and a historical character, he is also the representative sufferer. So too, when we pass from the individual to the national, the Jew stands before us in a representative character. Jewry, knowing the hand of God to be over it, but suffering as no other people, without knowing why, shows true spiritual insight, when it sees the parallel between itself and Job.

JOB AND WISDOM LITERATURE

Our unknown author did more than turn the prose of suffering into deathless verse and universalize it; he definitely set it in the framework of what is now known as "wisdom literature"; on this point conservative and liberal are of one mind. It links up with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

In an age in which the possibilities of book learning were few, those who had it were known as the Wise and were highly honoured in the community. In Jer. 18:18, we find them standing beside the priest and the prophet. As Rylaarsdam says of them "The role of the sages and the public estimate of them were very similar in all lands. They were the schoolmasters and the court counsellors."* Since God wills to be served by all

* *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, p. 9.

portions of a man, we have the wisdom of the Wise represented in the Old Testament.

In Proverbs we see the Wise, Solomon and others, seeking to understand the working out of God's providence among men. Apart from Agur (ch. 30), they are convinced that where the fear of the Lord is there also will be an understanding of His works. They saw in man's experiences such uniformities that the Wise, if they were humble, could lay down the general methods of God's workings. Note that there is no claim to prophetic inspiration in Proverbs.

In Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) the writer, placing himself in the position of Solomon in his old age, a disappointed backslider whose unequalled wisdom had failed to make him wise in the things of God, questions the unqualified optimism of Proverbs. He shows that however great the wisdom it will fail to make sense of God's actions, if it once becomes purely self-centred.

Job, on the other hand, is a direct challenge to the whole concept of Proverbs. As we shall see in our study, one of its main conclusions is that man cannot always understand the ways of God, and God does not always will to reveal them to men. *Job* is finally satisfied not by having his questions answered but by a revelation of the incomparable majesty of God.

There is no real contradiction between the three wisdom books. The picture given in Proverbs holds good for the vast majority of cases. The case of *Job* is obviously intended to be exceptional, but we cannot dictate to God whether we are to have exceptions or not. God may at any time upset our carefully made plans and show that His actions cannot be contained within the narrow span of human understanding. Qohelet then reminds us that all our wisdom is nothing worth unless it is linked with true godliness; otherwise the purposes of God will always remain enigmatic even to the wisest. So the three books form a spiritual unity, and we may never forget the message of the other two as we study *Job*.

Earlier I said that our author had deliberately set *Job* in the framework of what is now known as "wisdom literature". This was not meant to imply that it is in any way typical of wisdom literature, as Proverbs is. Pfeiffer writes very well:*

"If our poet ranks with the greatest writers of mankind, as can hardly be doubted, his creative genius did not of necessity rely on earlier models for the general structure of his work and

* *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 683f.

for the working out of its details. Admitting at the outset that there is no close parallel to his poem, in form and substance, we may regard it as one of the most original works in the poetry of mankind. So original in fact that it does not fit into any of the standard categories devised by literary criticism. All general classifications fail to do justice to the overflowing abundance of its forms, moods, and thoughts; it is not exclusively lyric, . . . nor epic, . . . nor dramatic, . . . nor didactic or reflective, . . . unless the poem is cut down to fit a particular category. . . . Even the more comprehensive characterizations . . . fail to do justice to the scope of the work."

We must bear in mind also that whatever the rank and social position of Job and his friends, they are introduced to us as belonging to the Wise. The one exception is Elihu. Entirely consistently with this their discussions are, so far as Job will allow them to be, the discussions of the Wise, in which we see the world mirrored not always as it is but as it ideally should be. The anguished realism of Job first angers them and then silences them, but if Job is more realistic than they, it is because he has learnt from bitter experience.

THE INTEGRITY OF THE BOOK

The question whether the prose framework of *Job*, as we now have it, is by the same author as the verse that forms the heart of the book, or whether it is older, is normally a mere literary question, and as such may be ignored. But there are cases like that of Stevenson in his recent penetrating study of the book, where the separation is made in order that the poetic part may be given an interpretation contrary to that permitted by the prose introduction. We grant without hesitation, that by this process much of the difficulty of the book is removed, but this is an outstanding example of how the Bible must not be handled and interpreted. No really cogent reason for the separation is given; indeed the whole suggestion is in itself most improbable. Apart from this we are under obligation to let the Word speak to us in its wholeness, not to cut it down and cut it up until it suits our perception.

Most modern commentaries wish to delete longer or shorter parts of the book as later insertions. The reasons given are

almost invariably subjective, and they are normally palpably weak or of minor importance. The only two cases noted in this book are ch. 28, the Praise of Wisdom, and the speeches of Elihu (chs. 32-37). It has seemed wisest to defer discussion of these passages until they are reached in the normal order of events, cf. pp. 89 and 103. It is only as we have been studying *Job* through all its development of thought that we shall be in an adequate position to judge whether these passages do or do not fit into its warp and woof.

It has been very strongly urged that in places the text has been dislocated. Our increasing knowledge of ancient manuscripts shows us how easily this might have happened. The most obvious example is 31: 38ff. There can be no doubt that 31: 35ff represent the climax and conclusion of Job's words—as they stand, the closing verses of the chapter present an intolerable anticlimax. It is easier, however, to recognize the dislocation than to say at what point in the chapter the misplaced verses originally stood.

The other passage that concerns us is chs. 25-27. As our text stands, Bildad gives a half-hearted reply in ch. 25, and when Job answers in ch. 26, Zophar shrugs his shoulders and leaves Job to wind up in ch. 27. If it stood by itself, there would be no real difficulty in the fact that in 26: 5-14, Job out-Bildads Bildad in his description of God's greatness and transcendence, but in 27: 13-23, we find Job repeating his friends' views on the fate of the wicked in even stronger terms than they had used, although in 27: 5, 6, 12, he had just reaffirmed his unshakable dissent. This is patently absurd and a contradiction of the book as a whole. None of the many attempts to re-arrange the text is wholly convincing, and the trouble may be in part due to loss of a section owing to the breaking of the papyrus roll. In the treatment of the text in ch. VII no attempt at rearrangement has been made.

THE POETRY OF THE BOOK OF JOB

When we try to discover what determines whether a passage of literature is to be considered prose or poetry, we find that there are two factors involved. One, undoubtedly the more important, is the language used. This is so generally recognized, that there is no need to deal with it here. Long before the technical principles of Hebrew poetry became known to Western readers, the

beauty of the language of *Job*, even in translation, had brought universal conviction that here was poetry of the highest order.

The other factor that distinguishes poetry from prose is that the former uses certain technical devices which create the sense of compactness and regularity. These have varied from period to period and language to language.

Almost the first thing that strikes a child about the poetry, or it might be better to say verse, that it meets is the rhymes. These are completely lacking in Biblical poetry, though they may be found in mediaeval or modern Hebrew poetic writings. It is true that Stevenson claims (p. 60), "Rhyme is used very sparingly, but it is not to be ignored where it occurs." This is unlikely; the few examples are probably accidental or possibly special cases of assonance. Alliteration in the formal sense in which it is normally used in English is not found either, but assonance, the repetition of similar sounds, is quite frequent in *Job*, far more so than is normal in Hebrew poetry.

The second feature in most of our poetry that strikes even the casual reader is the regular rhythm we call metre. This undoubtedly existed as a major factor in Hebrew poetry, but for various reasons we are not able to be certain of its details today. There seems little doubt, however, that more metrical freedom was allowed than in most English poetry.

To these technical devices Hebrew adds parallelism, which is unknown in classical or modern European poetry. It may be briefly explained by saying that each metrical unit was divided into two, occasionally three or even four, approximately equal sections. Normally this metrical unit, except in the prophets, coincides with the traditional verse divisions. The thought in the first section is then in some way continued or balanced in the following section, or sections.* The printing adopted in the R.V. and more modern versions, except Knox, makes this parallelism clear.

The outstanding importance of this parallelism has been that it has permitted translators to give the sense of rhythm and balance in Hebrew poetry without having to struggle to reproduce its metres and assonances. A word of warning has to be given to the reader. He must always be prepared to take the metrical unit as a whole in his interpretation instead of concentrating on the smaller sections. These are consciously incomplete.

* A more formal treatment of the subject is given in my *Men Spoke from God*; reference can also be made to any good Bible dictionary.